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The Faith of the Priest Today

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CHRISTIAN FAITH has by its very nature a new historical form in any given age. God Himself is changeless, but His call to men has a history. Therefore, it makes sense to speak of and ask about the Faith *today*. Each age and each individual must realize the Faith anew, and in many respects differently than it was done in previous ages. Likewise, within a given age, there are many different situations in which men live — the European and the African realize the same Faith in a different form, as do the peasant and the scientist. Therefore, we must not only believe, but we must let our Faith express itself in the form that is called for by the situation in which we live. We shall single out four characteristics that should be present in our Faith today.

FRATERNAL FAITH

The faith that is called for in today's world is a faith which is deeply conscious of our relations to others who are brothers — the laity, and even unbelievers. This relation should be a dimension in our faith itself. It is of the nature of faith that it presupposes and creates a community. This relation is not to abstract man, nor to man as he should be or man as we would like him to be, but to man as he is today—our faith involves us with this man. But priests are in constant danger of seeing themselves as different in their faith than the laity, as having some kind of a different faith. We are God's ministers, yes, but first we are believers just as the laity are be-

lievers, with all the difficulties, risks, darkness and temptations that their faith entails. We tend to see ourselves as the administrators of God's love in his government of the world, as God's specialists and experts; we act as though we knew God's plans through and through, and that others would do well to listen to us whenever there is question of heavenly things. This attitude blinds us to our fundamental situation as believers, and prevents us from entering into dialogue with other men. Therefore, fraternal faith is the faith of the priest who is aware that he is fundamentally a member of the community of believers, that he believes with these others, and not in some superior and privileged fashion.

This calls for humility in the priest. Our faith cannot be that of the "beati possidentes," but that of one who is constantly searching to discover what the formulas of his faith really mean, what the significance of his faith is for the fulfillment of his existence and that of his brothers. We cannot let the faith become or be suspected of being a mere traditional superstructure from another age erected over today's reality in which it has no roots.

This means that we must make our faith really worthy of belief—we must propose nothing to others which we do not live or try to live ourselves. We must be engaged in a daily battle against the routine of theological words and formulas, against moral recipes which we learned without really understanding. All theological clarity and accuracy is secondary in comparison with the strength of spirit and heart with which the final questions of life must be faced, and in which we priests have no advantage over the laity.

We must see ourselves and be seen by the laity as constantly praying: "Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief." There is no place for serenity or complacency in the faith today — we must be searching, seeking, striving for God, and not present ourselves as those who have found Him, and with Him the answers to everything. It is by entering into the world of today, and being with men in their difficulties, their anxieties and doubts, that we can bring this world to faith, and not by posing as somehow different. Our obligation and grace

as priests is to come to faith from whatever situation in which the men of our world are, because that is where they to come to faith from, i.e., the world of science, of technology, of scepticism and disillusionment. Our faith must be such that even the unbeliever cannot deny that here a man believes who is like himself, a man of today, on whose lips the word God does not come easily and cheaply, who doesn't think he has mastered everything, and in spite of all this, rather because of all this, he believes.

For Christianity is not a formula which makes everything clear, but the radical submission of myself to an incomprehensible Mystery Who has revealed Himself as ineffable love. If we have such fraternal faith, the unbeliever could not so easily suspect that what we are so earnestly defending is ourselves and the established order in which we find ourselves, being interested in him.

IMPERILLED FAITH

Every age has its own task before God; the task of today's world is to believe. For today it is not this or that belief this or that article of the faith which is called into doubt but faith itself, man's capacity to believe, man's ability to commit himself completely to a single, unambiguous, demanding conviction. He finds himself in a world changing more rapidly than he can keep up with, a world in which new discoveries are constantly upsetting the worldview he has grown used to. Psychology has discovered unknown depths within him and astronomy has shown him the vast, limitless reaches of the universe outside of him. What new discoveries, what new world he shall find himself in tomorrow he doesn't know. All this is a threat, a challenge, a danger to faith, to man's very capacity to believe.

And this is the world in which our own faith must manifest itself; our faith is imperilled, unless we close our eyes to the world in which we are living. We must see and accept this danger if the men of today's world are to come to faith in such a situation. It is a sobering thought for any priest to realize that no single priest, no single theologian is in a

position to bring forward a proof for the reasonableness of faith in today's world, for no single theologian can master all the various sciences and disciplines that would have to be mastered if answers were to be given to all the difficulties which arise from so many different quarters. What we need in fundamental theology is a global proof of the reasonableness of faith, showing that in spite of the fact that no individual can answer all the difficulties, man can and must believe.

The danger is that we shall not relate our faith to this situation, that we shall substitute theological formulas and pastoral routine for real faith, that we shall erect a thin ideological superstructure over an existence that is radically profane and secular. We must accept the fact that it is not theology, but God who protects our faith, that our weakness, even the weakness of our faith, is God's strength.. We must admit the inadequacy of our formulas to express the Reality we believe in. We must admit our vulnerability, we must confess the threatening emptiness of life, of everything human, including ourselves and our ideas, and we must admit this more radically than the most radical sceptic, more disillusioned than the strictest positivist. When we thus admit the dangers to our faith, we have entered into the ground on which alone the faith today can stand and from which men today must come to believe. Only this will show the world that what we believe in is not ourselves or our ideas or our capacities, but in God. This will show that man and the world are not God, that only God is God — incomprehensible mystery to which man must give himself without understanding, but in faith and hope and love. This is the beginning and the end of Christianity. Man must experience the bottomless abyss of his own existence before he can experience the nearness of the Mystery that is God.

INTEGRATED FAITH

It is no longer adequate for us to present the content of our faith as a gigantic collection of propositions which together and individually are certified only from without, by

the authority of the revealing God, the fact of revelation itself being treated only abstractly and formally. This dogmatic positivism, this formal, abstract, extrinsic understanding of revelation cannot be accepted by the men of today, whose notion of God is of One who is too transcendent, too absolute, too incomprehensible for Him to be imagined as having given us an arbitrary collection of propositions, along side of which any number of others are equally conceivable. This collection of sentences man is supposed to accept without seeing that they are the fulfillment of his own existence.

Faith today will be accepted only if it is presented as the one, single, total answer of God to the one, single, total question that man in his existence poses and is. This does not in any way compromise the factual and historical nature of God's revelation, nor does it mean eliminating or ignoring any of the truths, in which we believe. We are not calling for a reduction of the faith, but a simplification and unification in which everything will be related to the central mystery, and this central mystery to the existential situation of contemporary men.

We can say that there are three fundamental mysteries in Christianity, Trinity, Incarnation, and Grace, and these three are themselves intrinsically related to each other. We would have to bring out that in the functional Trinity the immanent Trinity is already given, since in Christ is given the absolute *self*-communication of God. We would have to understand man as being in the depths of his existence an openness to the mystery of God, which mystery in revelation presents itself as a forgiving and loving self-giving to men, without ceasing to be a mystery. We must develop a meta-physical, *a priori* Christology to be added to the *a posteriori* Christology of Jesus of Nazareth, the former being developed from a metaphysical anthropology, making it intelligible that the definitive self-expression of God implies the God-Man in a divinized humanity, that the absolute giving of salvation and the definitive acceptance of such self-communication of God through humanity means the God-Man of the Chalcedon dogma.

We must show that the essence of Christianity, with all its contingency and historicity, is the most self-evident of truths, for in a correct understanding of man the most self-evident thing is the absolute mystery of God in the depths of man's own existence — and the easiest and most difficult fact of our existence is to accept the self-evident Mystery in its ineffable, loving and forgiving nearness. This is the essence of Christianity, for the whole of the history of salvation and the history of revelation is the divinely ordered history of man's coming-to-himself, which is a reception of the divine self-communication, having its unsurpassable highpoint (subjectively and objectively) in the person of Jesus Christ. In this way Christianity can be shown to be not just another religion along side of many others, but the fulfillment of all religions, and only thus will the man of today in his concrete reality and thinking be existentially and psychologically in a position to accept God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

We are in constant danger in our life of faith, in our prayer and meditation, and in our preaching, of missing the forest for the trees, of not letting our faith become existential, rooted in and an expression of the depths of our own existence. Such an existential deepening of our faith means necessarily a concentration and simplifying of the content of our faith, not in the sense of rejection and exclusion, but in the sense of integration and putting in perspective.

We must show the man of today that he has had experiences of supernatural, divine grace, that he again and again and necessarily has had these experiences, and it is on this level, not that of conceptualization of the experience, that he first comes into contact with Christianity. This of course presupposes that we ourselves are open to these experiences, and do not remain on the level of conceptualization alone. This will show that Christianity is not essentially a system to be taught, a system whose blase ideology evaporates before the brute facts of everyday living. This is necessary today in a special way because Christianity no longer has the support of tradition and sociological factors which it had when Europe was Catholic.

TRANSCENDENT FAITH

In our philosophical and theological theism we know that God is infinitely beyond whatever else is or can be thought, that no similarity between Him and creatures can be thought which does not involve a greater dissimilarity in the very similarity, that we have no knowledge whatsoever of God's essence, that God is the completely incomprehensible Mystery. Is this always evident in our thinking and speaking about God, does it make itself felt in every step we take in our theological work, or do we lose sight of the mystery of God in our preoccupation with problems about God? Are we as aware as we should be of the transcendence of God, the 'godness' of God, the silence and the mystery of God?

We must never allow ourselves to make God one element among many others in the life of man; He is not an element in anything; He is and must remain the Absolute. God in revealing himself did not cease being ineffable Mystery. We can well ask ourselves whether, when contemporary man rejects God, he is really rejecting God or simply rejecting the God that we present to him? Does his search for a transcendent God lead him to reject the God that we seem to have fitted nicely into our concepts and formulas? Is he atheist only in regard to the God who is one element in, the highest point of and the final piece in *our* explanation of the universe? We often speak as though we knew the plans of God, were in on His councils, rather than of Him to whose absolute will all is subject, who is the transcendent ground of being in all reality, nature and history, who is responsible for all that happens and is Himself responsible to no one. The question, then, is whether in our speaking about God (in the overtones, not in the dogmas themselves) we are too primitive, too categorical, too univocally tied to worldly conceptions in our formulations. We must so speak that it is clear that our speaking brings not concepts and propositions, but the effective Word of the Gospel — the communication and the acceptance of God.

PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE WORLD

If, then, "God" does not mean one element in the world and in experience along side of many other elements, only more powerful than they, but rather the incomprehensible ground and horizon of all things, then God is that towards which our spirit tends in its confrontation with all realities: God does not enter into our horizon as an object coming from without, but as the utterly transcendent goal of our spirit. Given this transcendence of God, and the supernaturally elevated transcendence of man (granted the fact of an historical revelation and the possibility and necessity of expressing it in concepts), then our preaching always meets a man who, whether he knows it or not, whether he wants it or not, is an anonymous Christian — a man to whom grace is offered, a grace which is the self-communication of the Trinitarian God in that expression of God we call the Hypostatic Union.

This means, and we should be conscious of this, that we do not live among pagans with no experience of grace, whose first contact with Christianity comes from without and through our concepts, but with men who are living in a supernatural context, the depths of whose existence has already been touched with grace, but who as yet have not come to discover their true identity. This consciousness should have its influence on our own faith, and be an important moment in its transcendental form. It should make our faith broad, confident, patient: the people of God live not in the midst of wolves, but among sheep who are still straying.

Such faith sees all men as brothers, whether they be believers or unbelievers, in the depths of whose being grace is working and coming to meet us when we approach from without to announce the historical message. Our obligation is to present the message in such a way that they can recognize it as the answer to the longings of their own hearts, as the fulfillment of their existence.

Such faith allows that God is bigger than our spirit,

our heart, our word, our faith, our Church; it is the faith of the Church that God is greater than all else, even greater than the Church. He is greater in that he is more powerful, he is more victorious, he can enter where we cannot. Our faith, then, can always be confident, even today: God wants His victory to be not ours, to be enjoyed by us, but the victory of God, the God who wants us to believe in His victory even in our weakness and defeat. It will be a faith that is aware of the infinite difference between our words and the Reality they seek to express, a Reality that can be expressed only by the divine Logos speaking in the heart of man.

Thus when we speak the message and are not heard, we are defeated, but we must change this defeat into an increase of our own faith, a faith that knows that God can conquer in the defeat of his messengers; that we need God, but God does not need us. To such faith the future is secure; it is in God's hands.

Let us, then, say to ourselves and to others in our faith that God is—God, the eternal mystery that demands our worship, Who while remaining mystery, gives Himself to us in the radical immediacy, corporally and historically in the person of Jesus Christ, and through His Holy Spirit in the depths of our own existence, and let this faith, and this alone, be our strength in living and our confidence in dying.*

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